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homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

Monday, May 15, 1944

Subject: "HOME CONSERVATION OF FEATHERS." Information from the Extension Poultry Specialist, and Home Management Specialist, War Food Administration.

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The month of May is usually a fine time to wash feathers and household articles made of feathers. That's why so many homemakers always plan to wash their bed-pillows and feather beds in May.

Many homemakers who have a home poultry flock are already collecting feathers regularly, and saving them for pillows, or selling them. Others have overlooked this wartime saving. New waterfowl feathers and down are constantly wanted to make insulated jackets, trousers, and sleeping bags for the armed forces. The home poultry flock can also yield a good many chicken & turkey feathers that wouldn't be so good for military uses. The poultry and home management extension specialists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the War Food Administration suggest that many people could save these feathers and later on use them at home to make warm bedding. Once washed you can store the feathers until fall or until you are not so busy with garden work and other spring jobs. Save all kinds of small feathers up to two and a half inches long---duck feathers, goose feathers, turkey feathers, and chicken feathers---and even the feathers and down from wild ducks and other wild fowl. Some of the chicken and turkey feathers have big hard center quills, but don't discard these feathers. Strip them by pulling the soft side parts away from the stiff quills. These pieces come off in rolls, and will make good comforters, especially if you combine them with about the same quantity of small whole feathers. The stripped rolls are not as fluffy as down or springy whole small feathers, and they break up more easily if you use them by themselves. A mixture lasts better.

The first thing to do with newly plucked feathers is to wash them and dry them thoroughly. If you don't do this promptly you may find the feathers get

moldy, or develop strong odors. As soon as you can, soak the feathers in lukewarm soapy water containing household ammonia, or baking soda, or borax. Use ammonia if any of the feathers are blood-stained. This scouring removes dirt and natural grease. Rinse the feathers thoroughly in lukewarm water. Then soak them again in warm clear water for 30 or 40 minutes, and drain them.

Dry the feathers as fast as you can by placing them in cloth bags and hanging them in a warm breeze. Don't fill the bags over a third or a half full of damp feathers, to allow for plenty of air circulation and the increased size of the feathers as they plump up and take up more room. Shake and plump the bags at regular intervals until you are sure all the feathers are dry. Turn the bags end to end and side to side on the line about every hour.

So much for washing newly plucked feathers. If you have old feathers or soiled stored feathers, clean them in the same way, in warm, sudsy water, without using the ammonia, baking soda or borax. You can wash feathers in bags, or just wash the old pillows, with a "stomper" or vacuum, or do them in the washing machine. Don't put in more than one bag or one pillow at a time. Keep up the suds or bubbles. If the water gets very dirty or the suds go flat, make a fresh sudsing water. Sometimes a pillow is so tightly filled with feathers the washing water can't circulate. With this kind of a pillow, open a seam and sew in a width of strong muslin to make the case larger. If the original ticking is very soiled, use a brush on it. Scrub it with soapsuds on a table.

You may want to take the feathers out of the tick and wash them separately in a muslin bag. To transfer them, sew the top edges of the bag to the edges of one end of the pillow, and shake the feathers into the bag. Sew it up and then wash it. Wash the tick by itself. If the old tick was not completely feather proof, you can dip it in hot starch after the last rinse, or rub the hot starch into it from the outside. Iron when almost dry.

Some washing machines have a spinner or dryer which is a great help in drying feathers rapidly. You can also help the feathers dry indoors by circulating air

over them with an electric fan. Never let damp feathers get warmer than body temperature, or they will lose their "bounce." Some laundries and dry cleaners are equipped with a pillow renovating machine which steams and sterilizes the feathers better than you can do them by home methods.

You're probably too busy just now to do more than wash the feathers so you can save them until fall. Then, if you need extra warm bedding, you can make them up into a feather comforter. You put a feather comforter together a little differently from a cotton or wool comforter. The main object is to keep the feathers from shifting about as they do in a feather bed or pillow. When you make a cotton or wool comforter, you lay the filling on the under cover on a large flat surface, put on the upper cover, and then tuft, or quilt, or stitch a design through all the thicknesses in such a way that the filling cannot shift.

You can do the same in making a feather comforter, but feathers slip about so easily it is hard to keep them evenly distributed. Instead, it's better to make "tunnels" for the feathers. Stitch the upper and lower coverings together in crosswise rows about 6 inches apart. Stuff the feathers into these tunnels with your hand or a yardstick. Some experienced quiltmakers use more elaborate designs, but the general idea is the same. When the feathers are all spread evenly in a tunnel, close the ends and go on to the next one. Finally stitch all around the edges of the comforter for a secure finish.

In some states, especially in Wisconsin, North Dakota, New Mexico, and Tennessee, the Extension Service has prepared directions for washing feathers and making feather comforters. Ask your home demonstration agent about this if you need further help.

